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A GENERAL STRIKE IN NEW ZEALAND

For more than twelve years after the passage of the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1894 there were practically no strikes in New Zealand, but the Auckland tramway strike of November 14, 1906, marks the beginning of a new era, since when strikes have been quite common. A summary of strikes from year to year is given as follows:¹

1894 to 1905.....	None
1906	1
1907	12
1908	12
1909	4
1910	13
1911	21
1912-1913 (to March 31).....	35
Men fully successful in	25 cases
Employers successful in	42 “
Compromise effected in	28 “
Average duration of strikes in days (43 trivial cases not included).....	23
Total number of strikers (trivial cases not included)	3,686
Total number of men rendered idle (trivial cases not included).....	8,380
Approximate loss in wages to workmen concerned (average £33. 15s.)	£283,206
Approximate loss to employers concerned.....	160,414
Total amount of fines inflicted on strikers.....	1,917
Total amount collected to date.....	1,532

These figures indicate a good deal of dissatisfaction with the Arbitration Act, and a number of unions have cancelled their registration since the year 1908; but for all that the act seems to be still fairly popular with the workers, as is shown by the following table:²

Date	Unions of workers	
	Number of unions	Number of members
December, 1903	258	27,640
“ 1904	273	30,271
“ 1905	261	29,869
“ 1906	274	34,978
“ 1907	310	45,614
“ 1908	325	49,347
“ 1909	308	54,519
“ 1910	308	57,091
“ 1911	307	55,629
“ 1912	322	60,622

¹ *Annual Report of the Department of Labour, 1913, p. xii; New Zealand Official Year-Book, 1913, p. 676.*

² *Annual Report, 1913, p. xiv; Year-Book, 1913, p. 675.*

As there are only about 71,600 union laborers in New Zealand, it appears as though the unions were well satisfied with the act, and yet figures such as these are susceptible of various interpretations. For example, Mr. J. Macgregor, always a severe critic of the act, lately said: "The Industrial Arbitration Act is the most complete failure of all our legislative experiments, and the labour leaders simply tolerate it because it serves their purpose."³ It may be noted, in passing, that as there are about 300,000 wage-earners,⁴ male and female, in New Zealand, the members of unions registered under the Arbitration Act constitute only one fifth of that number, and that the members of unions not registered number little more than a thirtieth of all wage-earners.

It is this minority of a minority which forms the nucleus of dissatisfaction with the Arbitration Act and with the whole capitalistic system. For a long time the labor leaders of New Zealand were affiliated with the Liberal party, but of late years they have shown a strong trend toward independence. At a Conference of Trades and Labour Councils held in Auckland in July, 1910, the New Zealand Labour party was formed, for the purpose of obtaining, by political and constitutional means, "the gradual public ownership of all the means of production, distribution and exchange." About the same time was formed among the miners of the West Coast the New Zealand Federation of Labour, commonly called the "Red Fed," an organization closely related to the Industrial Workers of the World, and favoring direct action, the general strike, and other syndicalist methods. After a time these two organizations lost their identity, being merged in the United Labour party of New Zealand, and the United Federation of Labour.⁵

The United Labour party was formed in April, 1912, largely through the efforts of "Professor" Walter Thomas Mills, formerly of Milwaukee, representing the executive of the Trades and Labour Councils. It was a combination of heterogeneous elements, including many socialists, and has been a rather unsuccessful attempt to combine, in one organization, the political and industrial activities of the labor movement. Hon. J. T. Paul, a prominent labor leader, was elected president, and among the members

³ *The Press* (Christchurch), July 5, 1913.

⁴ *Year-Book*, 1913, p. 131.

⁵ *The Round Table*, No. 13 (December, 1913); *The Voice of Labour*, Nov. 29, 1912.

of the executive was Mr. J. A. McCulloch, the workers' assessor on the Arbitration Court.

Shortly after this, occurred a serious strike of the Waihi gold miners, which lasted from May 13 to November 20, 1912. It was caused by a dispute between the miners, who had cancelled their registration under the Arbitration Act and had joined the United Federation of Labour, and the engine-drivers, who had seceded from the federation and registered under the act. It was, in effect, an attack upon the principle of arbitration and an exposition of the "direct action" tactics of the federation. This was a prolonged and bitter struggle, with much violence and intimidation, but finally the government sent a large force of police to keep order, and the mines were re-opened and worked by new unions registered under the Arbitration Act. The federation received a severe defeat, but immediately began preparations for a more decisive struggle, that should, if necessary, attain the dimensions of a general strike.⁶

Soon after the Waihi strike was over it was proposed to form two new organizations to take the place of the New Zealand Federation of Labour and the United Labour party, the one to represent the industrial and the other the political activities of the militant labor forces. The industrial organization was to be called the United Federation of Labour, and the political organization was to be known as the Social Democratic party. For this purpose a "Unity Congress" was held in Wellington in July, 1913, but it resulted in disunion and a permanent split in the ranks of organized labor. The more radical leaders, including Mr. W. T. Mills and other members of the United Labour party, went over to the socialists; but the more conservative leaders, including Hon. J. T. Paul, Mr. W. A. Veitch, M.P., Mr. M. J. Reardon, and about thirty per cent of the delegates, stood by the United Labour party.⁷ This minority, however, represented the attitude of the majority of union workers in New Zealand.

It was at this congress that the notorious "preamble" was presented, almost a literal copy of the one adopted at the first convention of the Industrial Workers of the World.⁸ This preamble

⁶ *Annual Report*, 1913, p. ix; *The Voice of Labour*, Nov. 15, 1912; *The Springfield Republican*, Jan. 29, 1914, article by Hugh Lusk.

⁷ *The Round Table*, No. 13 (December, 1913); *The Press*, Jan. 26, July 3, and July 12, 1913; *Practical Politics for the People*, by Hon. George Fowlds (Auckland, 1913).

⁸ Paul F. Brissenden, *The Launching of the Industrial Workers of the World* (University of California Press, 1913).

was excised, but most of the propositions are to be found scattered through the constitution of the United Federation of Labour, and the strike clauses show clearly the intention of the federation to use the general strike as occasion may demand. One of these clauses reads as follows:

The United Federation of Labour will employ the strike weapon, local, general, or national, whenever the circumstances demand such action. In the event of a lock-out or authorized strike, the full strength of the United Federation of Labour shall be at the call of the national executive in support of the section affected.⁹

After the "Unity Congress" adjourned, on July 11, the victorious party carried on an active campaign through its dual organization, especially among the miners, seamen, and wharf laborers, with whom they had already great influence. They were planning, evidently, to control the transportation service; and although they could not win the railway servants, their position was very strong, for much of New Zealand's traffic goes by sea. The employers, too, felt that a trial of strength was inevitable, and it required only a slight pretext to constitute a *casus belli*.

The trouble began in Wellington with a minor dispute concerning travelling pay between the Union Steamship Company and about a dozen members of the Shipwrights' Union, a branch of the Wellington Waterside Workers' Union, which itself was affiliated with the United Federation of Labour and had cancelled its registration under the Arbitration Act. The Shipwrights' Union went on strike on October 18. The Waterside Workers decided to call a special "stop-work" meeting on the wharf at eight o'clock on the morning of October 22 to consider the grievances of the shipwrights. The "stop-work" meeting was held, as announced, and lasted about two hours. When the men went back to work some of them found other union men working on their jobs, whereupon the executive of the union demanded that the late comers be reinstated forthwith. The shipping companies refused to do this, and the strike was called. The control of the strike was then placed in the hands of the executive of the United Federation of Labour, as provided in the constitution.¹⁰

In support of their refusal to obey the dictates of the union, the

⁹ *The Round Table*, Dec., 1913.

¹⁰ *The Press* (Christchurch), Oct. 24, 29, Dec. 24, 1913. *The Dominion* (Wellington), Nov. 8.

employers took the ground that the agreement under which the men had been working had been broken, and was therefore void. They cited Clause 28, which provided that in case of dispute work was not to be stopped, but the dispute was to be referred to a special committee, and afterwards, if necessary, to higher authorities. The employers claimed also that as the union was not registered under the Arbitration Act the agreement had no binding force. They objected, also, to dealing with the federation, as that organization was in principle opposed to agreements and as some of the leaders, notably the secretary, Mr. P. Hickey, had often used strong language in condemning them. At a meeting of representatives of the shipowners and the Harbour Board on October 25, it was resolved that the employers could not permit resumption of work under the late agreement, but would enter into a new agreement embodying practically the same terms, but registered under the Arbitration Act. It was also resolved to make urgent representations to the government of the necessity for making adequate protection of life and property on and around the wharves.¹¹

At the instance of the Prime Minister, Hon. W. F. Massey, a conference was held on October 28, at which the employers made six alternative proposals, as follows:

- (1) Registration of the agreement under the Arbitration Act.
- (2) Registration of the union under the act.
- (3) Reinstatement of the national agreement with provision for a penalty of £1000 for a breach of Clause 28.
- (4) The same condition for a local agreement with £500 penalty.
- (5) Decision of the dispute by a ballot of the men taken under government supervision.
- (6) The whole matter to be submitted to Sir Joshua Williams as arbitrator.¹²

All of these proposals were rejected by the federation. The employers met again on Saturday, November 1, and agreed to withdraw all their offers except the proposal that the agreement be registered under the Arbitration Act. *The Press*, a government organ, thus expresses the view of the employers:

It is intolerable that the business of a great port like Wellington shall remain under the control of any body of lawless men. However much one may regret the necessity for any serious trouble that may follow the assertion of the community's rights, the public as a whole has learned that, as we have often urged, it will be morally and

¹¹ *The Press*, Oct. 27, 1913.

¹² *The Press*, Oct. 30; Dec. 24, 1913.

economically cheaper to resist syndicalist domination than to submit to it.¹³

In opposition to the stand of the employers, the workers, while admitting a minor breach of agreement, claimed that this did not involve the abrogation of the agreement. They refused to have anything to do with the Arbitration Court, and demanded unconditional reinstatement. They called the affair a lockout, rather than a strike, and designated the employers' actions as "sheer pin-pricking." They claimed that the employers had no right to compel them to register, as the act itself did not do so but was merely a permissive statute. Mass meetings were held; violent speeches were made by some of the labor leaders; there was some violence and much intimidation; and for some days the wharves were in the hands of the strikers and practically all the shipping was tied up.

On November 2, a deputation of representatives of the federation, accompanied by Sir Joseph Ward, leader of the opposition, Hon. J. T. Paul, president of the United Labour party, and other prominent labor leaders, waited upon Mr. Massey to ask him to call another conference. On November 3 and 4 it was held, and the workers offered to resume work on the basis of a new agreement and a penalty for stoppage of work; but the employers now refused to compromise, and would agree to nothing less than registration under the Arbitration Act.¹⁴

The attitude of the government was very firm and it was determined to maintain order at any cost. On October 25 the commissioner of police issued a call for volunteers to enroll as special constables. The call received immediate response from clerks, civil servants, and other young men of the cities, but especially from the country people; and presently hundreds of mounted farmers were riding toward Wellington to enroll as special constables and to break the strike by acting as volunteer wharf laborers. The farmers were threatened with serious losses because of the stoppage of transportation at the beginning of summer, and were determined to protect themselves to the best of their ability, following the example of the "Free Labor Brigade" of Sweden, which did so much to break the general strike of 1909.¹⁵

The strike soon spread to Auckland, Lyttelton, Dunedin and

¹³ *The Press*, Oct. 30, 1913.

¹⁴ *The Evening Post* (Wellington), Nov. 3, 1913.

¹⁵ Sir Henry Clay, *Syndicalism and Labour*, ch. IV.

other seaports, where the course of events was very similar to that in Wellington. By an odd coincidence, a strike of coal miners at Huntly occurred on October 20, two days before the trouble broke out at Wellington. On October 28 some 300 wharf laborers went on strike at Auckland, where presently the trouble was more serious than at Wellington. An Auckland coal dealer well expressed the temper of employers in every part of the Dominion when he said:

The only thing to do now is to make a fight of it to the bitter end, no matter how long it lasts—three, or even six months. . . . This is the only way to get peace for a year or two. We must fight the strikers with their own weapons.¹⁶

By the end of October there were over 5,000 watersiders on strike in the various ports, while disorders were increasing and disturbance to trade was becoming daily more serious; but at the same time large bodies of special constables were encamped on the outskirts of several towns, waiting until they had sufficient force to take possession of the wharves. At Wellington, on November 5, a thousand special police rode down to the railway wharf from their camp at Mount Cook to protect a shipment of race-horses, and on the way sustained a fierce attack from a mob of strikers and their sympathizers throwing stones, bricks, and other missiles. The police charged the mob several times, and the affray was very serious, resulting in about thirty casualties. On the next day the police once more surrounded the wharves; there was no further resistance, and regular work was begun by a new union registered under the Arbitration Act, assisted by some of the seamen. The new union began with 47 members, but before the end of the strike more than 2,000 were enrolled, chiefly farmers.

The course of events was very similar at Auckland, where, on November 8, a force of over 1,000 police occupied the waterfront. As a protest against the use of the special police, the federation ordered a general strike in Auckland, and on Monday, November 10, the strike leaders claimed that 14 unions, involving 7,500 workers, were idle. Later the seamen also went on strike, bringing the total up to 8,000 or more. At this time the following telegram was sent to all unions in Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin:

In view of the gigantic conspiracy to smash organized labour and the life and death struggle throughout New Zealand, in order to preserve unionism against armed blacklegism, we call upon your

¹⁶ *The Press*, Oct. 29, 1913.

union to make a common cause by refusing to work till the armed scabs leave the city. Auckland is magnificently solid. Will you follow? Labour's defeat means labour's annihilation.¹⁷

The response to the call was by no means encouraging. Only the drivers came out in Wellington. The strike was at no time very serious in Dunedin, where the regular police were able to keep order. The port of Lyttelton was closed until November 18, when work was resumed with the members of a new union under the protection of a large force of special constables. The strike was more general on the West Coast, where the mines and sawmills were closed for many weeks and industry was at a standstill.

The following estimate of the number of unionists and strikers was given by the Wellington *Evening Post* on November 20, and is probably fairly accurate:

	<i>Unions</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Under the Arbitration Act.....	322	60,622
Under the 'Trades' Union Act, and not registered	24	11,000
Total	346	71,622

Under the Arbitration Act

Striking Unions	18
Membership	5,000
Unions at work	304
Membership	55,622

Number of Strikers

Seamen	2,000
Miners	4,000
Watersiders	5,000
Other unions	5,000
Total	16,000

From these figures it is evident that the strikers constituted a small minority of all union workers. Even in Auckland only 15 unions out of 55 went on strike. Because of the large bodies of special constables at all important points there was little violence after the early outbreaks, and merely a "strike of folded arms," which practically failed within a week of the general call. Presently it was found that the strike funds were running low, and some unions were ordered back to work that they might contribute to the support of the rest. On November 23 the general strike was called off at Auckland, leaving only the transportation section

¹⁷ *The Dominion*, Nov. 11, 1913; *The New Zealand Herald*, Dec. 20, 1913.

still out. Meanwhile the trouble had spread to Australia, for the watersiders of Sydney refused to handle "black" cargo from New Zealand, and the cargo of several ships was handled by the Union Company's office staff.

The watersiders' strike also might have been called off about this time if the federation had not still expected to effect a compromise with the employers. In this hope they were encouraged by the attitude of Sir Joseph Ward in Parliament, who at first proposed special legislation and afterwards wished to refer the dispute to Sir Joshua Williams.¹⁸ Hon. W. M. Hughes of Sydney, formerly Attorney General in the Fisher cabinet, offered his services as mediator and made the same suggestion. These overtures were taken as a confession of defeat, and the employers refused to recede from their original position.

The seamen's strike was officially declared off on December 19, and on the same day it was decided to call off the strike for all other workers, except the miners, as from Saturday, December 20. The seamen were to renew their agreement for a period of three years, the Auckland branch to remain registered and the Wellington and Dunedin branches to register under the Arbitration Act.¹⁹ The watersiders at all the ports immediately flocked back to the wharves, asking to be enrolled in the new unions, all of which were registered. Work at the Huntly mine was resumed on January 6, 1914, with a new union of over 100 members, under the protection of the police, and on January 10 the old unionists voted to join the new union. A few days later the workers in the state mine agreed to go back under the act, as also did the miners at Blackball, and the great strike was ended. As a correspondent wrote:

The Federation of Labour leaders have been completely defeated. Not only has their plan of a general strike entirely broken down, but their root idea of keeping outside of the Arbitration Act so as to be at liberty to strike without incurring penalties has been completely checkmated.²⁰

Among the causes which brought about the failure of the strike, the following are deserving of special mention: first, the strength of the employers' position and their determination to make a united stand against the federation; second, the firmness of the government in preventing violence; third, the uprising of the farmers; and fourth, divisions among the working class. The United Labour

¹⁸ *Parliamentary Debates*, Nov. 11, Nov. 28, 1913.

¹⁹ *The New Zealand Herald*, Dec. 20, 1913.

²⁰ *The Australasian* (Melbourne), Jan. 3, 1914, article by "Pakcha."

party, at first silent, issued a manifesto against the strike on November 14, and later drew up a detailed statement giving a review of the strike and condemning the revolutionary policy of the federation.²¹ Hon. J. Barr was very outspoken in his opinions, putting the federation wholly in the wrong, criticising its poor leadership and unwise methods, and declaring against the breaking of agreements whether registered under the Arbitration Act or not.²² Hon. J. A. Millar, one of the fathers of the Arbitration Act, made a telling speech in Parliament in which he declared that "a strike has never been of any benefit to the workingman and never will be."²³ On every side the strike was condemned as an egregious blunder; the Red Fed was completely discredited; and syndicalism in New Zealand received a blow from which it will not soon recover.

The Massey government has gained great credit for its firmness in meeting a difficult and threatening situation. Not only was disorder and violence put down, but a number of the federation leaders were arrested, convicted of "inciting persons to commit a breach of the peace," and either fined or imprisoned. On the other hand, Sir Joseph Ward has lost prestige, and the Liberal party seems to be on the verge of disintegration. The by-election at Lyttelton, held in December, because of the death of the Liberal member, Mr. George Laursen, appears to show the trend of events in the political field. In the first ballot Mr. J. McCombs, Social Democrat, received 2,075 votes, Mr. J. Miller, the Government candidate, received 1,560 votes, while the Liberal candidate, Mr. J. B. Laursen, received only 922 votes. In the second ballot Mr. McCombs was elected over Mr. Miller by a majority of 226 votes. The socialists were elated at the success of their candidate, and promised to take a further revenge at the general election in December of the present year. There will, of course, be a fierce struggle between the Social Democratic party and the United Labour party, which will surely be a source of weakness to the cause of labor and should prevent any notable gains in the coming election. But in any case the policy of "direct action" is for the time discredited and "political action" once more takes the lead.

An important amendment to the Arbitration Act, the Labour Disputes Investigation bill, was passed on December 15. It involves an application of the principle of the Canadian law to unions

²¹ *The Press*, Nov. 15 and Dec. 24, 1913.

²² *Ibid.*, Nov. 17, 1913; *The Oamaru Mail*, Dec. 31, 1913.

²³ *Parliamentary Debates*, Dec. 13, 1913.

and workers not registered under the Arbitration Act. Henceforth, unions that have cancelled their registration will not be altogether free to strike, but only after complying with the provisions of the new law as to notice, secret ballot, investigation, and publicity.²⁴ If this law had been in effect earlier in the year, it is highly probable that the watersiders' strike would not have occurred.

As to the present status of the Arbitration Act, general belief is that it has been greatly strengthened, yet whether it has been strengthened in the affections of the wage-earners is very doubtful. Formerly there was only one-sided compulsion, and the act was used by the workers as a weapon against the employers; now the weapon is in the hands of the employers, and the workers are being compelled to make enforceable agreements under the act. Naturally, the defeated strikers resent the action of the employers in driving them into the arbitration fold and making them join "scab" unions, and will surely break out again on the first favorable opportunity. Meanwhile, they will give more attention to "political action," and it will be interesting to see what they can accomplish in the general election.

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²⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, Dec. 12, 1913, pp. 1075-1139.